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## LITERARY BACKBITING.

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LA HARPE called Shakespeare a "coarse flatterer of the vulgar herd." About two hundred years earlier, Robert Greene, a fellow dramatist, described him as "an upstart crow beautified with our feathers"—meaning plumage borrowed from writers supposed to be his betters; and also as being, "in his own conceit, the only Shake-scene in a country."

Familiar words! If we were to accept them for truth, we should have to set Shakespeare down as not only a base panderer to those from whom he expected to draw profit, but also a wretched impostor in literature. Even were his reputed authorship of the plays conclusively transferred to Bacon, the case would hardly be improved, so far as the charge of flattery is concerned. Hugo, commenting on these two efforts of detraction, says: "That everything should be perpetually re-examined, that everything should be contested, even the incontestible—what does it matter? . . . Genius, being truth and liberty, has a claim to persecution. . . . Anything admits of being written. Paper is very patient." But it is not genius alone which enjoys this right to be persecuted. The honest, workaday writers who toil hard, molest no one, and never pose as geniuses, are equally subject to the attacks of petty malice and incompetent disdain. And so—paper still retaining its quality of imperturbable patience—we are treated in these latter days to a vicious and unvarnished assault upon a number of New York authors, who are characterized as an organized band of humbugs, leagued together for the purpose of mutual inflation, insincere praise, and the foisting of valueless books upon the public. We are told that they are "pinchbeck idols," "brummagem gods," "hucksters," "peddlers of spurious wares," "parasites." But we are not told who these objectionable and repulsive creatures or images are. The writer of the extraordinary outburst here referred to contents himself with apparently intimating that they

are persons who were mentioned in a magazine article published several months ago. With a vagueness even more Sibylline, he affirms that among us there are many good and true men—real authors—who remain in the background, and do not advertise themselves; but the privilege of hearing their names is also denied us. Why? Is it because the writer, as one of them, objects to advertising his own name? He declares that it is time for the good and true men to handle the impostors without gloves. It might be well to add that they should also make their attack without masks.

Whatever the reason may be, this individual prefers to deal in generalities. That is the safer position for him. It is much easier for one who maligns to be impressive, to fulminate awe-inspiringly, when he avoids particulars. He is thus enabled to make himself as terrifying as the wire and cloth dragon in *Siegfried*, with lashings of the tail, effected by jerks of a cord, breath of steam from veritable pipes, and a roar simulated by windy trumpets in the stage wings. The roar of loudest sound, in this instance, is directed against an imaginary institution, described as a "puffing club," which is supposed to have branches in New York and London. I think every genuine literary workman in New York, who perused the account of this institution, must have been struck with amazement—either at his own ignorance in not having hitherto known that such a club existed, or else at the ignorance of the essayist who could believe it existed. For my own part, it would seem hardly worth while to notice such a statement, except for the fact that the man who makes it offers a gross and wanton insult to the whole literary guild in New York. He proceeds to outline a theory which he puts forth as a summary of fact, to this purport, that the literary world of the town—so far as the town has one—is dominated by a clique of mediocre writers; men without merit in their profession, who have brought themselves into notice by resorting to the lowest devices of advertising. These men, he says, are writers of indifferent poems, of weak prose fiction, of histories that are not histories. Sometimes they are editors of magazines, sometimes newspaper critics. The critics praise certain works, expecting that the men who wrote them will, at the first opportunity, praise something which the critics themselves may publish. The contributors to magazines, and the

writers of books, flatter the editors and laud their compositions, in order to secure the acceptance of manuscripts which they themselves intend to offer for publication. In this way, he explains, the members of "the clique"—O, term of fearful fascination to the ears of the soured and the suspicious!—exchange compliment after compliment, and pile eulogy upon eulogy, until the credulous public is persuaded that these fraudulent scribblers are of some importance.

Any one who makes charges of this kind is, of course, mentally and morally opaque, impenetrable by the light of truth. If his charges be answered, he exclaims: "You see the excitement I have caused; therefore what I said must be true!" If his insinuations be decently interred in silence, he dances upon the grave, insists upon exhuming his own infamy, and declares that the neglect to which his calumnies were consigned is positive proof that he was right. Therefore such a person is unworthy, so far as he is concerned, of consideration or argument. But it is of some importance that, when false statements have been made, we should ask a few questions and review a few facts, in order to define the boundary between malicious perversion and sane perception.

How is it that the honest men of letters who do not belong to "the clique" fail to exert their power by destroying its influence? Is it possible that true merit is so weak, so colorless, that it cannot be recognized or remembered? Is the mass of intelligent readers really given over to the dictation of a few impotent mountebanks, who force them to buy and read that which they do not want? And, if readers really are such *fainéants*, how can they be intelligent? By what sorcery are commonplace books "floated into circulation" upon "a flood of panegyric?" Every publisher in the land will tell you that no amount of favorable notice in the magazines, the reviews, the journals, will make a book "go," unless the people decide for themselves that they want it. On the other hand, books which are neglected or maltreated by the critics—books which are not immoral or sensational, but are condemned merely as uninteresting, or as deficient in literary art—frequently secure an enormous popular success, and sometimes win esteem by fresh literary qualities which the critics had failed to appreciate. The power attributed to the imaginary confederation of literary *claqueurs* is not theirs to control, even if they

wanted to use it. They may be Jupiters to the skulking eye of the pseudonymous assailant ; but they are Jupiters without the thunderbolts which he assigns to them.

Apparently, he has been led away by an impetuous ambition to rival Mr. Churton Collins's recent attack on Mr. Gosse and a supposed "ring" of authors and reviewers in England. What the condition of affairs may be as to "literary log-rolling" in England, I do not know. I am sorry to see that Mr. Andrew Lang has advanced a plea, as it appears, for favoritism, or at least for glossing over the faults or weaknesses of one's friends when they have written books. No one who maintains a high standard of duty or rectitude in fulfilling the functions of a critic, however humble, can subscribe to a rule which exempts his friends from candid and impartial treatment. A writer may be pardoned for speaking of what he has himself experienced, in connection with this topic ; and I therefore feel at liberty to say that I have never heard this doctrine of leniency advocated by reputable men of letters in New York or Boston, although I have seen a good deal of literary people in both these places during the last sixteen years. Nor have I ever known it to be put in practice here by writers possessing influence or respectability. But the pseudonymous reviewer has read Mr. Collins's anonymous attack on Mr. Gosse and the London "ring" ; and, feeling that it is not well for him to be behindhand with the fashion, he has imported Mr. Collins's idea into this country. If a ring exists in London, there is one in New York ; or, if there isn't, there ought to be ; and he proceeds to make one out of shreds and patches put together according to his fancy.

Unless I be completely in error, there is no literary or artistic club whatever with branches in England and this country, except a little social circle which I mentioned in "The Literary Movement in New York," published in *Harper's Monthly* for October, 1886. It looks to me very much as if the dragon who snorts at the clique of his own imagining had seized upon the allusion which I there made to the Kinsmen, and had at once constructed from it—in the steam-pipes and wire coils of his interior economy—the "puffing club," which he boldly projects as a reality. Now the Kinsmen form an association that grew up at hap-hazard. Half the members do not even know the other half, never have met them, have not exchanged letters, and take no personal

interest in them. When a few members are together, on either side of the Atlantic, they meet for a dinner or a breakfast, if it can be arranged. Generally it cannot be arranged, because the various men are too busy. All of them whom I know are entirely too busy to spend time in puffing either themselves or others. The meetings have occurred about once a year. So vanishes that particular jet of steam from the dragon's mouth.

We have not alone the testimony of magazine editors to the fact that they judge contributions on their merits. We have also the testimony of the magazines themselves. New writers, utterly unheard of before, constantly appear in the tables of contents, and sometimes they make a great success. If they do, they get to be in demand. A magazine is a business enterprise, and is governed by the laws of competition. The magazine must consult its own interest, and its interest is to please and hold the public. Everybody must go to the wall who cannot serve that interest. It may be that I, for example, am a brummagem god, in the opinion of somebody; but even that distinction does not secure me access to the magazines. About twice as many of my manuscripts were rejected, in the first nine years of my experience, as those which were accepted. Many trained writers of ability, after working for years, find that their manuscripts are now returned from magazines for which they have written before. The circumstance that they can sell them somewhere else proves no prejudice in the first instance. They simply did not find the right market at once. The needs of each magazine are constantly varying. As one who has been at sundry times editor, contributor, and critic, I may, perhaps, say, without offense, that I have never encountered the "ring" system, nor been able to see its effects. I have heard a great deal about it; and I was once informed, by two excellent friends of mine, that I stood in a very satisfactory position, because I was part of a certain "clique." To my surprise I learned that this clique was composed of persons who, as I supposed, from all indications, were indifferent and, perhaps, even hostile to me and to my writings; persons whom for several years I had not seen, and with whom I held little or no communication. From the extraordinary misapprehension of the two friends just mentioned, and from many other facts which have fallen under my observation, I conclude that rings and cliques are largely chimerical.

It is said that a writer—presumably one of the “good and true men”—who published an adverse review of a story in verse, by a magazine editor, found that he was never able, afterwards, to get any of his manuscripts printed in that magazine. It would be pertinent to inquire, whether the magazine had ever accepted anything of his before that time. It would also be apt, could we learn whether the manuscripts which he sent were of a kind adapted to that particular publication. It is easy to manufacture these imaginary grievances. I have seen a hundred opportunities for doing it myself; but, having learned something of the perplexities of editing periodicals, as well as the perplexities of contributing to them, I have found that arrant injustice is done by yielding to the temptation to theorize, and that he who does so follows a will-o'-the-wisp which leads him into the mire. An example of this is supplied by an individual who is enraged because the portraits of some literary laborers and journalists appeared in the frontispiece of *Harper's Monthly*, as parts of a group in an interior of the Authors Club. The frontispiece had no significance whatever, except as a representation of the club-rooms, and a few *habitués*, who were asked to sit for their portraits together, but had no idea that their names were to be printed under the engraving. Nevertheless, the enraged person constructs a theory that it was meant to be a sort of “Shakespeare and His Friends.” Such a theory can emanate only from the mind of a natural vulgarian; a vulgarian who makes himself infinitely absurd and contemptible at the very moment when he fancies that he is making others so by mocking at them.

Editors and authors resemble human beings in other walks of life, by having their likes and dislikes. In two or three cases I have noticed that antipathies have broken off relations between contributors and editors; and there can be no doubt that injustice is occasionally done. But, in the main, I am persuaded that the effort to be impartial and conscientious far outweighs the occasional injustice or the unconscious prejudice. For the most part American authors and editors are not only fair and generous; they are also sensitive about acknowledging or even recognizing anything that resembles a bid for favors in return. I know an editor who refuses to give to a member of his own family, who conducts another periodical, news about the publication under his charge, although the same news is given to other periodicals. I

have known another editor whose wife offered manuscripts to the magazine on which he was employed ; he declined even to look at her manuscripts until they had been passed upon and accepted, or rejected, by the other editors. I am intimately acquainted with a writer, B., who announced to another writer, C.—a friend of twelve years' standing—that their acquaintance was at an end, because B. had heard that this other writer, C., had accused him of reviewing C.'s work favorably, in order to obtain similar notices for himself.

It has chanced to me, many times, that I have had to write and publish my brief opinions upon the works of friends and enemies. I have been obliged to censure my friends, on occasion ; and I have repeatedly praised and recommended in print the writings of my personal enemies—those with whom I was not on speaking terms. This being so, it may fairly be inferred that others, placed in a similar position, have acted in the same way. The author of the diatribe which furnishes me a text is, naturally, incapable of comprehending such a situation or of understanding upright motives. He reminds one of that distinguished comedian, William Warren's, impersonation of the country legislator, Jefferson Scattering Batkins, who was always talking of "these Boston *clinks*" in the legislature. But the general public, which our new Batkins supposes to be so easily befooled has, I think, good sense and fairness enough to grasp the real situation.

There is certainly no excuse for "literary log-rolling." It is a detestable offense. But the censor of that crime—who so freely attributes it to a body of writers whom he has condemned without trial, without a hearing, without even a summons—has omitted to mention another malefaction at least equal in magnitude, of which he himself is guilty. I mean the crime of literary back-biting. The man who assails authors with distorted, dishonorable, and untruthful aspersions, under cover of mask and cloak, convicts himself of a dastardly deed, far more despicable than the extremest complaisance of mutual admiration. A pseudonymuncle of this sort, who goes up and down concealing his identity, carries a corpse inside his coat. It is the corpse of his own dead self-respect.

There are too many of these lifeless effigies in our universe. There are too many of these shameless advertisers of their own



old particular brand of mental bitters. Although, after long search and much exploration in the thorny paths of authorship, I have been unable to discover the propitious ring which we are occasionally assured exists, I have encountered, in glimpses, a dark saturnine ring of telescopic detractors. It operates dimly and at a distance. You can see it if you employ a lens of sufficient power to bring its baleful insignificance into view. The best astronomers have decided that the dark ring of Saturn "consists of multitudes of small satellites, mixed with vaporous matter, and traveling in flat flights around the central orb." This description corresponds almost exactly to the dark ring of literary backbiters. They execute the most terrible vengeance—in the air. They assassinate, they garrote or chloroform those of whom they are needlessly and foolishly envious—at a distance. By a curious conversion of ideas, these saturnine particles fancy that they are destroying and murdering flesh and blood creatures, while they are merely obscuring and extinguishing themselves.

Still, it is well to know of this dark ring, in order to avoid being insensibly governed by it. If the standard set up by these particles is to be applied to literary men; namely, that no author is to speak well of another—be he friend or foe—without incurring suspicion of interested motives; the same standard must be applied in all other relations of human life. Then, if you have a friend, and you speak well of him to any one in conversation, it must be assumed that you do so because you expect your friend to speak well of you on a future occasion. Then, too, if you have an enemy, and you speak well of him, it will presumably be for the reason that you wish to placate and truckle to him. No room will be left for honesty, integrity, dignity, fairness. Everything you may say or do will be open to the interpretation of being actuated by a mean and selfish motive. Let us, therefore, refuse to be ruled or influenced by the dark ring of Saturn. Let us thoughtfully and considerately usher all literary backbiters to the pit, which they so industriously dig for themselves. Let us not hearken to what Tennyson calls the "vermin voices" of gossip, which clamor to make the most ignoble view of life and conduct prevail. If we take these precautions, there will be some chance for decency, faith, and honor to progress gradually, as they are now doing.

GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP.